

oh noel by deathvalleyusa

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Summary:

The Christmas after Starcourt, the Hargrove home is too quiet for Billy to handle. He's grateful Max is there to break the quiet.

oh noel

It was quiet in the Hargrove home.

Not the quiet riddled with electricity, a warning of an impending explosion between Billy and Neil. Just... quiet.

He wasn't sure how to feel about it, if he was being honest. Relief definitely came to mind, but there was a tiny glimmer of fear hiding. That, at any moment, that electricity could turn into a lightning bolt and strike when Billy was already prone.

Neil insisted on a fresh cut pine every year. Liked the smell, the fullness of the branches, the shine from the needles. It was the one thing he and Billy could always see eye to eye on, even when he was small. Billy liked the thought of a piece of nature indoors, decorated with tacky heirloom ornaments and multicolored lights. It gave him some semblance of peace.

Last year had been less than peaceful. After everything with Max and Steve and waking up to his car being stolen, Billy was in a shit mood for Christmas. Neil had been in one too. It had ended with him getting locked out of the house one night, freezing his balls off until he gave up and slept in the Camaro. Christmas was quiet. Neil had spoken maybe three full sentences to him the entire day.

And now, nearly Christmas Eve, it was quiet again. Susan was trying to fill the quiet with holiday music, playing loud enough to fill the entire common area of the house. Max was busying herself with wrapping last minute gifts. Neil was out shoveling the driveway. The house smelled like pine and sugar cookies.

“Earth to space case.”

Billy looked up, seeing Max standing next to him, hands full of neatly wrapped gifts.

“What?” he asked, irritated.

“Those pain meds are making you loopy again,” she remarked, setting them under the tree. “You look out of it.”

She didn’t leave. Billy blew out an exhale through his nose, eyebrow cocking as she stared at him. Normally, he’d be more agitated by her presence, but her genuine concern under her words was a comfort.

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

Billy shrugged, pressing himself further into the couch. Max’s face was serious now, ginger waves falling off her shoulders. He only looked back at her, eyes heavily lidded.

“Do you want hot chocolate? Mom made some.”

Billy nodded. “In a bit. Can you sit for a second?”

She hesitated for a second before joining him on the couch. She settled close, a knee pulled close to her chest.

“Are you okay?” Max asked in hushed tones.

Billy clicked his tongue, running a hand through his now grown-out perm. The fact that she was the only person who could ask him and understand the full weight of his answers made him uncomfortable. A kid shouldn’t have seen the things she’d seen. She shouldn’t be the one to check up on him; he should be doing that for *her*.

“I’ll be fine,” he replied.

“That’s not what I asked.”

Billy looked over at her before looking upward at the ceiling. “Then no. Not really.”

He hated that she looked crushed at his admission. All he had wanted was some physical closeness, not to feel that suffocating feeling of guilt that he wasn’t *okay* yet, that he might never be *okay*. He wasn’t even sure what *okay* was anymore.

Without a word, Max leaned over and wrapped her arms around him. It was a firm hug, enough to make his back ache a little. Billy squeezed his eyes shut, sitting there in his sister's embrace, hoping to take in her optimism for his physical and mental health by osmosis.

He hugged back, fierce and desperate. Felt the hitch in her breath as his surprise embrace came, the relax of her shoulders. They sat there for a few moments, Bing Crosby crooning out a classic from the kitchen radio. Billy rest his head on her shoulder, taking it all in.

He thought about how last Christmas, he had wished he didn't exist.

This year, Billy was grateful he still did.

"That hot chocolate sounds good right about now," he whispered, pulling away to lean back into the cushion. He gave a half-hearted smile, getting one in return as deep blue eyes tried their hardest to understand exactly what was going on in his head.

"You got it, space case." Max patted his shoulder before heading to the kitchen.

Fingers drummed out the beat to 'Little Saint Nick' as he waited. He spotted a small hole in his shirt sleeve, lips pursing as he realized it probably had happened while sliding his arm into the forearm crutches he was so reliant on at the moment. Honestly, he would've gotten up and got his own damn hot chocolate if he didn't need the crutches.

Max padded back into the living room, a mug in each hand. The concentration on her face as she made sure not to spill brought a smirk to his face.

"Look at you," he said, grin growing wider. "A waitress in the making. How much should I tip? I've got a few quarters on me."

"Shut up." Max grinned back, carefully handing him the mug. "I didn't know what toppings you wanted so I just went with the works."

He glanced down at the mug, eyebrows raising. Whipped cream, cinnamon, and a sprinkle of some sort of candy cane dust obscured

the hot chocolate. “Shit, you really did. Thanks.”

A year ago, he probably would’ve complained. He didn’t need all this froufrou shit, but Max had gone out of her way. Hell, he had never been one to indulge in holiday comforts. But, as he learned, life was unpredictable. He might as well enjoy it while he still had a place in this world.

Billy took a sip, making a face as the whipped cream touched his nose. Max let out a laugh, settling in next to him before taking a drink. He raised his eyebrows, giving her a look before taking a scoop of her own whipped cream and smashing it into her nose.

“*BILLY!*” she shrieked, desperately trying to wipe it off as he cackled. “Dammit, it went up my nose!”

He only laughed harder, nearly spilling on himself. “You should see your fucking face.”

“You’re the worst,” she shot back. “I’m gonna replace all your presents with coal, just watch.”

“Where the hell are you gonna find coal?” Billy taunted with a lazy grin.

There was a pause before she reached out, taking a big scoop of cream from his mug and wiping it on his face.

“Hey!” He made a face as he wiped it away. Fire lit up in his eyes, rubbing the remaining glob into her cheek.

“Stop it!” Max squealed. “You’re gonna make me spill my drink. Billy, STOP!”

“*You* stop!”

“Hey!” came Susan’s voice. “I don’t know what you’re doing in there, but both of you quit it.”

Billy pursed his lips, looking straight ahead. Anytime Susan tried to break up their fights, he felt like a fucking child. With a sigh, he took the remainder of his whipped cream and casually mushed it against

Max's mouth. A grin so big it almost hurt bloomed on his face as she let out a disgusted screech.